TL 2011

Background briefing on the human rights situation in East Timor during 1994

This briefing aims to describe developments related to the East Timor question during the period since the last UNCHR meeting in February 1994, so as to provide a context within which the information presented in reports from human rights organisations and in first-person accounts can be better understood.

Expanding Acess

The commission in 1994 called upon Indonesia to continue the policy of expanding access to human rights and humanitarian organisations as well as international media. Let us look at the extent to which this access was conceded and the ensuing events.

Media access

During a visit by 25 foreign journalists in April 14 a group of 5 young Timorese staged a brief protest in front of the visitors hotel in Dili, holding up a banner and calling for the release of Xanana Gusmao in spite of the security forces maintaining what the BBC corresponent described as "a tight grip on the city". A letter had earlier been passed to the journalists from the CNRM (Comissao Nacional da Resistencia Maubere - the resistance umbrella organisation) with a number of demands including the withdrawal of Indonesian troops and the release of political prisoners. A number of young people were later detained and in June three of them received 20-month prison sentences. The official Antara news agency later reported that Indonesian military authorities in East Timor had angrily criticised the journalists saying that some had treated their visit as an "investigation" trip and had strayed from the official agenda.

At the time of the APEC summit in Jakarta in November a considerable number of journalists were allowed into the territory. Minister of Information Harkomo stated "There is no ban on foreign journalists"as long as they abide by the rules of the game, such as being in possession of the proper permit" Jakarta Post Oct 15. Thus members of the international press were on hand to witness at first hand the Dili pro-independence protests on the 14 and 15 of November when hundreds of youths were involved in violent clashes with police and military and again on 28 when an apparently staged pro-integration demonstration led to more violence. This gave rise to considerable editorial comment including: ....

Human rights - centre stage

In the run-up ot the trade talks at the APEC summit, international opinion, focussed on these events and on the hunger strike by Timorese students in the US Embassy in Jakarta, was deeply perturbed at the developments in Dili. Political and human rights concerns, often thrust aside by the region's governments as their young economies boom, were brought on to centre stage: President Clinton raised the issue of human rights and East Timor "in firm and forceful terms" in his talks with President Suharto during the summit Reuter Nov 16; former US president George Bush, and a longtime staunch supporter of Suharto's government, expressed concern about the lack of progress on human rights in territory; The Australian Nov 24. Along with solidarity demonstrations in the US, UK and Australia, young East Timorese staged a protest at the Indonesian embassy in Spain and there was a demonstration by Korean human rights at the Indonesian embassy in Seoul, South Korea.

Meanwhile there was an immediate tightening of restrictions on journalists in East Timor leading to the expulsion of five including representatives of Reuter and Associated Press AP 21 Nov. and reporters were required to obtain written permits limited to two days. VOA 21 Nov The Jakarta Government accused journalists of inciting the demonstrators. AP 21 Nov Two more journalists were later expelled Reuter 1 Dec.

"People on the outside are listening"

The fact that so many Timorese participated in these protests attests considerable courage and desperation on their part knowing what had occurred in Dili three years before in Nov 1991 and the hard-line stance taken by military chief Major Gen. Adang Ruchtiana who had on 14 Oct. rejected an earlier offer of a cease-fire by Resistance leader Konis Santana and spoken of the sending of "a battalion of special combat troops" to East Timor. UPI Oct 14. The demonstrators may also have been encouraged by the fact that within East Timor, there is now considerable awareness of international support through radio and clandestine channels. Bishop Belo ws quoted as saying before the November events "After the years of silence, we still can't quite believe it. The young are very aware of it. When foreign delegations come, young people take incredible risks; but now they know peoople on the outside are listening ..." John Pilger, New Statesman and Society, Nov 25.

Aftermath of the November protests

Arising from these events, 125 Timorese were detained Amnesty International Update Nov 24. Human rights organisations expressed concern that, based on the pattern of events documented in the territory in previous such situations, those involved in the demonstrations in Dili, as well as the 40 Timorese students picked up before they could get join their companions at the US Embassy in Jakarta, would be harshly dealt with as soon as the international media had left. Indeed on 8 Dec. the BBC reported that dozens of people arrested in Dili during the November disturbances had been subjected to severe ill-treatment and torture.

On Dec. 7 pro-integration youths smashed up the office of Dili's sole newspaper and it was reported that the same group later beat up one off its reporters Reuter 8 Dec. Earlier in the same week, Col Kiki Syahnakri, an ABRI commander based in East Timor, threatened that if East Timorese participated in any more demonstrations "I will not hesitate to clean them out ['sikat'in Bahasa Indonesia]". Jawa Pos 1 Dec.

The recurring "image problem"

The overall pattern may be seen as one of an attempt by Indonesia to permit control relaxation of restrictions on access to East Timor by international media and then when these lead to evidence of human rights violations being revealed, embarrassing to the Jakarta Government and indeed supporting the allegations made by human rights groups like Amnesty International and Asia Watch who are being denied entry to East Timor, the reaction tends to one of repression and restriction of access. It is reported that the Jakarta Government paid more than half a million dollars to a US public relations firm to draw up a strategy and prepare press-kits to get around its "image problem" in dealing with the press attention expected during the Jakarta summit. According to a leaked copy of the firm's report, it was anticipated that opening access to the media for the summit would probably lead to undesirable revelations and publicity but it was hoped that this coud be successfully counter-balanced by vigourous promotion of more favourable news stories. Sydney Morning Herald Nov 14.

Accused of making contacts abroad

In May Jose Neves, a theological student and leading figure in the pro-independence East Timorese underground, was arrested in an East Java post office, as he attempted to post information on human rights gathered during a recent trip to the territory, along with a letter from resistance leader Konis Santana to the international conference on East Timor in Manila. At his trial in October he was accused of making contacts abroad to support rebellious acts against Indonesia and among the examples cited by his prosecution were letters to UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali and the Japanese Prime Minister Hosokawa. Kompas 14 Oct. His trial was then adjourned until after the APEC conference. When it was resumed in December no foreign journalists were present.

"Allow international monitoring" - Indonesian parliamentarians

In June the Jakarta Post reported that an Indonesian inter-parliamentary cooperation committee in a report, which was read by native Timorese legislator Salvador Ximenes Soares, had called on the government to respect human rights in East Timor and to allow international monitoring groups into the territory including Amnesty International and Asia Watch. (AFP 15 June).

Contradictory impressions from UK and Japanese MPs visits

Indonesian press: more openness and ... closure

Within Indonesia itself, a developing openness in press reporting on East Timor and other issues early in the year was followed by a clampdown. On 31 March the weekly "Editor" carried a detailed account of research by Indonesian academic, and former winner of the President Suharto environmentalist of the year award, George Aditjandro into the environmental effects of the Indonesian presence in East Timor. Dr Aditjandro's studies had confirmed the worst case estimates that 10% of the population of East Timor (60,000) were killed or died from war related deprivations in the first two months after the invasion by Indonesian troops in October 1974. He also said he had the names of 271 people killed and 200 missing after the Santa Cruz massacre in November 1991 (the Indonesian Government inquiry claimed that 50 were killed and 57 went missing). The article suggested this data could provide input to the up-coming round of UN-sponsored Indonesian-Portuguese negotiations in May.
This was the first time such comments had been published in Indonesia attributed to other than outside enemies of the state. In the following months there was increasing pressure on Editor which culminated in its closure in June along with June along with Tempo (for which Aditjandro was a regular columnist) and Detik. Dr Aditjandro also suffered for his outspokenness, his house was stoned by hooligans in March the day after a press conference at which he had spoken of his findings, and later in the year, in the run-up to the APEC summit, he was arrested and interrogated for 2 periods totalling 15 hours before being released. Tapol Report 25 Oct. He was again summoned for interrogation later on 28 Dec. a week after having testified for the defence in the trial of Jose Neves (see above). Tapol Report 23 Dec.

No Asian NGO conferences, please

When it came to NGOs in other Asian countries organising conferences on the Timor question, the reaction from the Jakarta Government was unequivocal: both in the case of the Manila conference in May and another in Bangkok in July, it was reported to have put strong pressures on the respective governments of those two countries to stifle the conferences by not allowing international speakers into the country to participate. In the former case this resulted in Irish Nobel Peace Prize winner Mairaid Maguire being denied entry in the Philipines and being sent back to Europe and and the name of Madame Mitterand of France was also included on the blacklist of those who would not be permitted entry. In fact, both events went ahead as planned, despite some speakers being sent back, and the attempt to prevent the meetings taking place generated considerable adverse criticism in the international press as for example:

Indeed Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans, normally a staunch supporter of the Suharto regime was reported to be "disappointed by" moves to stifle the conferences. Matebian News, E-mail, reg. easttimor July 26

Faltam secções:
Xanana Gusmao "leader of East Timor"
B Belo and the Timorese Church

Dialogue, confidence building measures ... and "Reconciliation"?

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1007 9+ 1020 8 CNRM - Alatas meeting
1017 3 New military chief rejects Santana ceasefire offer; prepares offensive using special combat troops
1017 8 100 villagers protest religious harassment
1020 Soldier court-marshalled and condemned to 28 months jail for Church wafer-trampling incident.
1021 5 B Belo rejects forced sterilization program
1025 2 Aditjondro interrogated for 15 hours and released
1028 3 $14 million US court award for Helen Todd
1028 5 Major oil find in Timor Sea
1031 1 + 1110 2 B Belo in "special status" talks
1110 6 Salvador Ximenes reaffirms need for all groups to participate in talks
1107 4 Xanana received United Nations Association of Australia Human Rights award
1112 6 Mairead Maguire nominates B Belo for Nobel Prize
1112 7 Xanana letter to Clinton
1114 2 29 Timorese in US Embassy sit-in; 40 others held
1114 12 Hundreds of youths in violent clshes in Dili
1114 14 Goodman, Nairn prevented from entering East Timor
1114 31 NY Times opinion piece) Ben Anderson 13 Nov "End Indonesia´s imperialist rule"
1114 36 74 members of US Congres caal on Clinton to raise human rights issues with Suharto at APEC
1114 5 Scores arrested in Dili
116 7 3 dead in Dili protests over 3 days (?)
1118 2 120 rounded up in ET: others in Indonesia
1125 3 Arrests total 135
116 17 Editorials:
NY Time 15 Nov
Boston Globe 12 Nov
The Times 17 Nov
Voice of America 23 Nov
117 6 Clinton raises human rights with Suharto
1117 11 Horta lambasts UK on Hawk sales
1123 4 Minister pledges probe into Hawk use
1118 25 Provocations in fresh rioting at Dili cathedral
1122 1+5 + 1123 6 Journalists restricted and 5 expelled from ET
1123 2 NY Times Belo interview: on Clinton: "He should say they should withdraw"
1124 8 100 students in renewed protests at Dili university
1125 2 George Bush expresses concern about lack of progress on humanrights in East Timor
1128 10 Embassy protesters arrive ino Portugal
1128 12 AI on APEC events ; list of 125 names of detainees
1128 23 Staged pro-integration demonstrations and crackdown on independence supporters
1128 25+ 1121 3 UK and Portuguese groups appeal for permanent UN presence in ET